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State should weigh banning of cyanide

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We are so proud of the 1898 American extraction of millions of dollars of Canadian gold that we put the symbol of the event on our license plates. Those are miners hiking up Chilkoot Pass, not dead mosquitoes. Now, over a hundred years later, it's the Canadians' turn to occupy Alaska's gold fields, potentially extracting billions of dollars. Today's miners aren't cheechakos with a shovel but corporate giants from the Canadian mining industry. Among the biggest of the bonanza mines is the Pebble Mine near Iliamna projected to yield up to \$26 billion.

According to environmental watchdog information, the Canadian mining industry generally operates in a socially and environmentally responsible way if there is regulatory oversight. Lacking that oversight, however, the record is variable, and among the chief problems is cyanide pollution.

It's not clear to what extent mines like the Pebble Mine will use cyanide leaching. That's because of the common two-stage strategy of mine development in environmentally and socially sensitive areas like salmon-rich Southwest Alaska. First, a development company, in this case Northern Dynasty of Vancouver, British Columbia, obtains the necessary permits and approvals. Then it sells its mine rights to one of the British Columbia-based majors who have the capital to operate the mine. Consequently, what the permit-getters say will happen is not necessarily what the operators do. Agreements need to be formalized.

So, it's time for Alaskans to think about cyanide.

Cyanide leaching extracts fine particles of gold that mechanical mining cannot remove. Sodium cyanide is leached through mine tailings that are contained in giant plastic-lined containment tubs. The cyanide bonds with small gold flakes and then is poured over charcoal separating out the gold. In a perfect world the system works well. But the remote Alaska north is not a perfect world for corporate mining. Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, human error or a cyanide tanker truck skidding off an icy mountain road can cause problems.

Cyanide pollution raises a lot of unanswered questions. Cyanide is lethal in small doses, starving cells of oxygen -- it was the gas of choice in the Auschwitz death camps. Industry scientists point out there has never been a human death from cyanide associated with mining. Undoubtedly true, but the same is not true for wildlife. Industry scientists state that should a spill occur into a stream sunlight will cause a natural breakdown into benign chemicals. Environmentalists counter that the breakdown depends on the acidity

of the water with certain conditions creating potentially lethal cyanide gas. And in cold conditions with lack of prolonged sunlight, like winter in Alaska, there is no evidence cyanide will naturally break down.

The most notorious case of cyanide pollution occurred at the Summitville, Colo., mine operated by a company controlled by Robert Friedland. For six years the cyanide leaked from the leaching pit at Summitville until it was shut down by the EPA in 1992. The cleanup has cost taxpayers \$120 million. For this and other environmental catastrophes, Friedland has been labeled "Toxic Bob" by Forbes Magazine. Friedland is still active in mining, including at a large gold mine in Mongolia and, according to the African business Web site MBendi, he is involved in joint operations with a subsidiary of Northern Dynasty's parent company in a platinum mine in Africa.

Montana banned cyanide leaching for new mines in 1998 after recording over 60 mining-related cyanide incidents in a 20-year period. The final straw seems to have been the refusal of the Canadian Pegasus Mine on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation to clean up cyanide spills. When Pegasus finally lost in court in 1996 it declared bankruptcy and left town.

We need to remind ourselves that the resources of Alaska belong to the people of Alaska. It's our gold. It's also our salmon. We should not be trading one for the other, particularly since one is sustainable and edible and the other is not. If cyanide is going to be used in mining, we should insist on the strictest possible safeguards encoded into law. We should consider banning cyanide.

Perhaps someday British Columbia license plates will have an Alaska open pit gold mine on them. Maybe they will also include the motto "We were required to do it the right way."

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Photo 1: BORAAS_BW_030505.jpg

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